Training Graduate Teaching Assistants: What Can the Discipline Offer?

Michael Barr (Newcastle University) and Paul Wright (Newcastle University)

Abstract

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) provide an invaluable contribution to higher education yet their role is often overlooked and understudied. We report on a UK based study to describe the experience and views of GTAs with particular focus on training and professional development. Our findings draw from a survey of 32 GTAs along with informal group discussions with a small number of undergraduates and academic staff. Given the importance of subject specific training, we conclude that the development and support of GTAs, as well as early career academics, may be better provided for by learned societies and academic associations within the discipline.

Keywords: graduate teaching assistants (GTAs); teacher training; learned societies; academic associations; doctoral students; early career academics

INTRODUCTION

For doctoral students who wish to build a career which includes teaching, the advantage of pedagogical training is clear. It is perhaps less clear but no less important for those students who do not wish to teach since the skills associated with teaching are highly transferable. These include not only the obvious skills of strong written and oral communication but also emotional sensitivity, adaptability, producing engaging written and audio visual resources, evaluation and decision making based on standardized criteria and the ability to work under pressure in deadline-driven environment (Newhouse, 1998). Employers in public and private

sectors seek people who and which formal teacher training can help develop, improving the employability of PhD students no matter what type of job they seek.

In this paper we explore the experience of GTAs with a focus on issues of training and development. A particular concern emerging from our study is the relative role of departments, universities, and learned societies in providing GTA training. Many academic teaching staff benefit from having GTAs to help deliver their modules[1]. GTAs significantly contribute to students' learning experience and offer an additional teacher, often one close to cutting edge research in the field, for undergraduates to discuss their ideas with. Yet despite the growing reliance on GTAs, research on them in the UK is still underdeveloped (Chadha, 2013; Jordan and Howe, 2017). As one piece in *European Political Science* rightly stated, 'teaching is a substantial element of the overall experience of PGRs. This needs to be acknowledged more explicitly within the literature offering guidance in Politics departments across the UK' (Mycock, 2007).

A UK National Union of Students (NUS) survey of nearly 1500 postgraduates who teach found that teaching provides financial support and experience to help GTAs in their future career paths (NUS, 2013). The survey also found that the experiences of GTAs across the UK remains highly varied with working conditions differing widely between institutions as well as internally between departments within the same institution. Postgraduates teaching in the

[1] As is common in the UK, we use the term 'module' to denote a unit of study. While there is variation across and even within institutions modules generally consist of one or two lecture hours and one seminar hour per week. At Newcastle, a typical student would take six modules per year, three in each semester. Module leaders tend to be – although are not always – full time academic staff who are responsible for the administration of the module and for providing many of the lectures. While GTAs sometimes lecture on modules and can serve as module leaders, their duties are usually to run the weekly seminars and, with module leaders, to mark essays and exams. Throughout the paper we use the term modules interchangeably with class.

arts and humanities, for example, reported being the least happy with their pay as they worked the longest hours and earned the lowest per hour in real terms compare to STEM students (NUS, 2013). The survey also reported that despite increased calls for teaching assistants to be trained by universities, one in five postgraduate teachers reportedly received no training or induction before they started their role and nearly half did not receive a job description (NUS, 2013).

The uneven experience of GTAs across the sector contributes to their ambiguous status which has been described as a condition of 'liminality', an in-between state where teaching assistants struggle to form a coherent sense of identity (Winstone and Moore, 2016). Many GTAs simultaneously hold roles as a teacher, researcher, student and employee. Many report a heavy workload, sizeable responsibility and limited degree of autonomy – leading some to feel like 'donkeys' in the department (Park and Ramos, 2002). In their transition from a student to a professional, many GTAs can feel uncertain about their status, feeling as if they are at the threshold of something different but not quite sure what that is. As a result, GTAs may not always see themselves as 'real' teachers even though teaching experience is crucial for the development of their professional identity (Winstone and Moore, 2016).

This 'in-between' status can often effect a GTAs level of confidence in their ability to teach (Keefer, 2015). A study by Muzaka (2009) at the University of Sheffield found that GTAs lacked both a sense of academic ownership and authority over matters of course content, organisation and delivery. They also did not see themselves as academic apprentices engaged in a meaningful, systematic professional development programme, although most full time academic staff perceived GTAs as academic apprentices (Muzaka, 2009). Such findings highlight a dichotomy between research and teaching. While much time and effort is spent on

training and professional development in the context of research, often in conjunction with UK Research Council studentship funding, relatively little time is spent on the development of doctoral students as teachers. Here the language is revealing, since we speak of 'research opportunities' but of 'teaching loads' (Keohane, 2009). Even the phraseology can be biased. The term early career researcher is sometimes used to describe doctoral students and even new lecturers yet the job responsibilities and paths to promotion for young academics relies significantly on teaching (Craig, 2014)[2].

In this paper we report on a project conducted at Newcastle University in north-east England. The structure of the paper is as follows. We first present the rationale and methodological aspects of our study. Key themes revolve around training, marking and professional development. We explore these with particular interest in the relationship between generic and subject specific training. This leads us to a discussion of the possible ways of delivering GTA training. In most, if not all, universities, the development of GTAs is the responsibility of the institution through some combination of departmental, faculty or university level instruction. The findings presented here draw attention to the limits of generic, university wide training and of the need for discipline specific guidance. In this sense, our results relate to a number of studies, highlighted below, which argue that GTAs lack of subject knowledge affects both their confidence and quality of teaching (Buckler, 2001; Chadha, 2013; Muzaka, 2009; Pleschova, 2014; Sadler, 2003). This leads to the question of who is best placed to deliver GTA training. The onus has always been on the local institution. We argue that while universities must continue to provide training and developmental opportunities, one underexplored path would be for Politics and International Relations (PIR) disciplinary

[2] We note that increasingly the term 'early career academic' is being used by academic associations and universities, although some funders seem slower to adopt the term.

associations to invest more in GTA training for both doctoral students who teach and early career academics.

THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS PROJECT

The Graduates Teaching Assistants project was funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Newcastle. It aimed to better understand and help support the teaching provided by postgraduate students who teach in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology. The project involved three main activities: an in-house (i.e. School level) training session for all GTAs; a mapping exercise involving a survey and group discussions to better understand the role played by GTAs and their concerns; and, the development of an enhanced Blackboard site to provide GTAs with an ongoing resource on teaching and marking, as well as a platform for communication with their peers and academic staff. This paper reports the findings of the mapping exercise and highlights several areas that politics and cognate departments and learned societies may wish to address in supporting the professional development of their GTAs.

The project team worked with GTAs to design a survey that addressed issues both they and academic staff felt were important. The survey was set up using the university's form builder software and administered from November 2016 to February 2017. It was advertised via email which provided a direct link for GTAs to complete the questionnaire. The survey was anonymous as we did not require nor ask for names. The survey was followed up with one to one discussions with a small set of GTAs (4), undergraduates (3), and module leaders (5) across the School. These discussions were noted but not recorded. The project obtained full University ethics approval.

The survey contained 39 questions across four sections: respondents' profiles; teaching; marking; and general comments. Questions were a mix between closed and open ended. The first section sought to identify basic demographic details including levels of student funding for their studies and which subjects (within the School) they were enrolled[3]. The sections on teaching and marking asked about the range of work GTAs undertook, training opportunities, and relations with full time academic staff. The final section gave GTAs the opportunity to identify any remaining issues they wished to raise including their views on what type of resources the university could provide to help support their teaching. Questions pertained specifically to the 2016-2017 academic year but also gave GTAs the chance to include their experience from previous teaching at Newcastle. Closed-ended questions were pre-coded in that they offered the respondent answers from which they had to choose (Cohen et al, 2011). Response categories were identified from existing literature as well as knowledge of the particular circumstances of teaching provision within the School[4]. In addition, we offered open comment boxes for select questions in case pre-coded categories did not capture all possible responses. Qualitative data (i.e. open ended responses and interviews) was categorised according to a frequency tally of themes, such as relations with module leaders, the nature of university level training, difficulties in meeting marking times and so forth. (Miles et al, 2014).

[3] Of the 32 respondents, all were or had recently been registered for PhD level study, with the vast majority enrolled as full-time (n=30; 93.7%). 26 (81.0%) had most of all of their studies funded. The gender of respondents was evenly split between men and women while the majority age group was 26-35 years old (n=17; 53.13%) with the second largest group being 20-25 (n=10; 31.25%).

[4] So, for example, a question asking which type of assignments GTAs had marked listed the range of assessments offered within the School; or a question asking if a GTA's marking had been reviewed would list the range of academic staff responsible for this, as well as providing options for 'don't know' and 'other'.

There were 32 respondents out of a total pool of 54 GTAs, a 59.25% uptake rate. Nearly half the respondents were from Politics[5]. In our presentation of the data, however, we include the results from Geography and Sociology. Many of the teaching arrangements are similar across the School, involving lectures, seminars and lab practicals for methods based modules. There is also significant overlap in students taking modules across subject areas. Furthermore, in a few cases the same GTA taught in more than one subject and/or was pursing their PhD in one subject while teaching in another within the School.

GTA VIEWS ON TRAINING AND MARKING

Data shows that GTAs in the School undertook a wide range of teaching and marking activities. All but one respondent reported doing seminar teaching while a substantial minority undertook lectures (n=9; 28.1%)[6]. Nearly two-thirds (n=20; 62.5%) of GTAs undertook marking, including written assignments, exams, and presentations.

Unsurprisingly, most GTAs reported their main source of support was either the module leader of the class they were teaching or other GTAs, especially those who had taught on the same module in previous years. There was significant variation in the level of support provided. Some module leaders gave detailed substantive support with weekly plans, hand-outs and video links. Others asked GTAs to design the seminar themselves around the weekly readings. According to one GTA, the ideal relationship was built on flexibility:

> I think the most important issue in the TA experience is the relationship between TAs and module leaders. I have been very fortunate that the module leaders have provided guidance at every stage of my TA experience, clearly explaining our respective duties, and have always given clear instructions for how they hope the seminars will play out, while still allowing me to tailor the seminars as I see fit (GTA 32).

[5] In terms of subjects, we had the following breakdowns: from Politics, (n=10; 31.2%); Geography (n=14; 43.7%); Sociology (n= 6 19%). 2 respondents were externally hired.
[6] 8 (25%) taught on fieldtrips; and, 8 (25%) undertook computer lab practicals.

Much of the survey focused on training. At Newcastle, GTAs are required to take a university wide training module 'Introduction to Learning and Teaching in Higher Education'. This provides the university's minimum training requirements for part-time and postgraduate teachers. It is a blended module which consists of an online component and a one-day workshop where participants reflect on videos of their teaching performance. Module content is fairly generic, focusing on styles and theories of learning and the skills involved in leading small group seminars, including dealing with difficult situations and responsibilities around diversity and inclusion. Students have the option of continuing on to further modules which begin to incorporate greater knowledge of subject specific methods. These lead to a Certificate in Advanced Studies in Academic Practice and provide a path to recognition with an Advance HE Fellowship under the UK Professional Standards Framework[7].

Many GTAs found the introductory course to be helpful but overly broad. As one respondent to our study wrote 'it was far too general because teaching politics is pretty different to teaching chemistry' (GTA 5). In a similar vein, Neumman, Parry and Belcher (2002) argue that there exist significant pedagogical differences between 'soft' and 'hard' disciplines which, in their view, casts doubt on the utility of generic university wide training. However, their work has been criticized for overly generalising the way in which epistemological structures influence learning, teaching, and assessment practices and the extent to which it misses the differences between and within the so-called 'soft' (i.e. interpretive) subjects such as Politics, Sociology, and History (Trowler, 2009; Craig, 2012). This raises a pertinent question: what is unique about teaching politics? In some respects, we could reply not very

[7] Following the recommendations of the Bell Review in the UK, Advance HE is the resulting name of a merger between the Higher Education Academy (HEA), which used to administer Fellowships, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and the Equality Challenge Unit.

much. There is undoubtedly much overlap with other disciplines in terms of epistemological stances, methodological commitments, key actors, and the type of issues addressed. There is also much overlap in teaching arrangements, methods and forms of assessment. However, as John Craig has noted, it is hard to think of other subjects in which the object of study can change so suddenly as it does in politics (Craig, 2012). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK notes that politics and international relations 'remains a highly dynamic subject, its subject matter open to change, as each generation reconsiders what is political' (QAA, 2014: 10). Earlier reports went so far as to claim that 'no other academic discipline' was in 'flux' as much as PIR (QAA, 2007: 4). We only need to witness the last couple of years to take this point. Political events are constantly unfolding and evolving on a near daily basis. Teaching certain topics within the subject can also bring potential risks as highlighted recently by requests from Chris Heaton-Harris MP for the names of those who taught issues relating to Brexit. As Gormley-Heenan (2012: 132) puts it, 'teaching politics can be a dangerous business' as teachers navigate a minefield of potential bias and offense. If PIR is distinctive in this way, it 'results in particular challenges in its teaching' (Craig, 2012: 31).

As part of the GTA project we developed a number of initiatives to balance the generic and subject specific requirements of teacher training. For example, we created subject specific Handbooks which laid out the roles and expectations of GTAs and providing practical advice on leading seminar discussions. More substantially, we developed a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) site – in this case using Blackboard – which provided both general pedagogical materials along with discipline specific folders. The site included FAQ from previous teaching assistants, HE sector reports, information on finding a teaching post and job adverts, and articles and links to discipline based journals which publish pedagogical

research. GTAs reported that the Blackboard site was a useful source of support, particularly for newer teachers. One GTA highlighted its utility as it 'applied examples to subjects I actually teach' (GTA 3).

One of the biggest issues raised in the survey pertained to marking. Many GTAs found it difficult to maintain a balance between speed and efficiency while continuing to provide quality feedback. Within Newcastle, Politics has been at the forefront of using Grademark, an online marking platform part of Turnitin. We expect the adoption of online marking to increase across university departments as undergraduates seem to prefer this system for several reasons. In practical terms, it means they can submit their essay without having to print it and hand it in in person. Students can then receive their feedback and marked scripts via the VLE without having to go and collect their work in an office environment surrounded by other classmates. More importantly, online marking provides the opportunity for feedback via in-text comments, voice feedback, and coversheets, all of which can improve the process (Williams and Smith, 2016). For GTAs, Grademark took some getting used to. The biggest drawback was that most found marking online much slower than marking hard copy. This was because, in part, of the time it took to learn the technical aspects of the system and also because, as a number of GTAs claimed, they tended to give more feedback on Grademark than in marking on paper. It was noted that 'one bad/poorly written script could really slow me down significantly, increasing the pressure for all the others' (GTA 29). Several commented that they marked quicker once they had more experience on the system. Others suggested that they did not speed up out of concern for the quality of feedback.

Providing training for marking is sometimes over shadowed by an emphasis on training for classroom teaching.[8] While it may be unreasonable to expect GTAs to mark at the same speed as module leaders who have created the module and taught on it for years, training can at least help ameliorate the situation described above so that GTAs are able to provide quality feedback while marking quicker than they currently report. One reason training is important is because of issues surrounding the pay of GTAs, which the NUS report as being the 'most major concern highlighted' in its survey (NUS, 2013). It is often the case that students who mark the most will work longer hours, but this is not always reflected in pay scales across the sector (NUS, 2013). In our survey only five respondents said they could do the marking within the time allotted while 19 GTAs claimed they ended up putting in additional time beyond what their pay scales compensated them for[9]. When asked about what types of training they found most useful, GTAs reported individually marking the same script and comparing for consistency, along with examples and instruction from previously marked scripts. Alongside this, our results suggest that marking training ought to help clarify for GTAs what constitutes 'good' feedback and provide additional guidance on matching the descriptors ('good'/'excellent') with actual numeric scores. GTAs also highlighted the value of a 'buddy system' where new markers checked their work against more experienced GTAs, especially when the GTA was marking on a topic outside of their expertise.

[8] There is an additional issue here, which sometimes overlooked (although see Blair et al, 2013 and Williams and Smith, 2016). That is, while much focus is on students' use of feedback, less attention is paid to consistencies and understandings of academic staff. Everyone will know there are differences – even in classifications – in marking. Given that markers operate from the same assessment criteria, there are significant questions about how criteria is interpreted and applied in academic units.

[9] The School compares quite favourably to other institutions, paying the higher of two rates set out by the University's Human Resources department. Renumeration at Newcastle includes time for preparation and administration when relevant; marking is paid separately per script, in line with HR scales, with a slightly higher rate for those who used Grademark.

Training clearly provides skill development to help GTAs support student learning. Training, however, is not synonymous to professional development. Training activities tend to focus on acquiring specific knowledge or skills required for a particular task. Development on the other hand is the continuous expansion of skills, knowledge and abilities aimed at long-term growth and career advancement. It involves a mix of training, networking, mentoring, feedback opportunities and other formal and informal learning activities. While the two are closely allied, in the next section we explore how GTAs may benefit from these wider initiatives.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A key aspect of becoming an effective and confident educator is the opportunity to learn from previous practice. The NUS reports that 'postgraduates are pleading for feedback on their teaching' (NUS, 2013). In their survey, half of postgraduate teachers received no feedback on their teaching from the module lecturer and around 30% of postgraduates who taught did not receive any student feedback (NUS, 2013). At Newcastle, all GTAs received feedback from module leaders as part of a system of peer observation. However, approximately one third of GTAs (n=10; 31%) did not receive student evaluations on their teaching. Of those who did receive evaluations, approximately half were through EvaSys software and half through self-created/administered questionnaires. As a result of the GTA Project we have now fully incorporated all GTAs into the EvaSys survey. As desirable as this is, it is also not without risk. For a number of teachers this would be the first time they have received written evaluations from students on their performance. As we know, evaluations are often gendered with female teachers receiving a higher proportion of critical, harsh or outright unfair comments (Boring, 2017). To help address this, we have offered all staff, including GTAs,

the option of having their feedback checked over first by the head of department who would take the necessary measures to remove any comments which clearly had no relation to teaching and/or were offensive or clearly inappropriate in any manner. Beyond this, we have also timed the release of EvaSys evaluations so that staff receive the comments on a weekday morning when there is opportunity to discuss their results with more senior members of staff should they wish.

As part of our project we included the views of a small number of undergraduate students, recruited through poster advertisements around the department. We reasoned that student views were valuable as they were on the 'receiving end' on GTA teaching and could help illuminate, from the perspective those taught by both academic staff and GTAs, issues which GTAs themselves had not identified. In these discussions, students were keen to highlight differences between their lectures and seminars. The notion of professionalism was a key point as students' noted that the approach, confidence, and manner of GTAs mattered significantly. One undergraduate commented that some GTAs tried 'too hard to relate to us' (UG 1). Another put it this way: 'Demeanour matters, I think it's important that GTAs model themselves on lecturers, rather than trying to be an upgraded version of undergraduates like us' (UG 3). Partly in response to these comments, the Politics TA Coordinator instituted a monthly 'Teaching Circle' to help promote the development of TAs, Teaching Circles are characterised by a small group of colleagues 'who make a commitment to work together over a period of at least a semester to address questions and concerns about the particulars of their teaching and their students' learning' (Hutchings, 1996: 7). Discussions have brought together academic staff from across the School with GTAs and have centred on topics such as innovative methods, technology enhanced learning, finding a teaching job, and feedback.

A number of GTAs also commented on the importance of acquiring confidence, linking it to receiving 'positive feedback' (GTA 28). In his work on GTAs, Sadler (2013) found that levels of confidence were often tied to 'content knowledge' – that is, to subject specific knowledge. If a GTA felt secure in what they were teaching, Sadler (2013) showed that they also seemed more likely to innovate or take risks with different teaching methods and approaches. This in turn led to fuller incidental feedback from students, often in response to more interactive approaches, which helped to increase a teacher's confidence. Sadler concluded that the form and content of continuing professional development needs to incorporate context specific knowledge (Sadler, 2013).

To summarise thus far, GTAs clearly provide a substantial contribution to learning and teaching in the School, alongside conducting their own research. A significant number of GTAs 'enjoyed' their teaching and found the experience useful for skill development and career opportunities. As one commented, teaching was 'a great way to experience what it feels like to be an academic, and to decide if it is a career path to pursue at all' (GTA 15). That said, GTAs identified a number of areas in need of attention. These include the need for relevant and timely training for both teaching and marking, issues of pay set by the university for hourly contracts, especially in relation to the time GTAs spent marking essay and exam scripts, and opportunities for career development and advancement.

THE ROLE OF ASSOCIATIONS AND LEARNED SOCIETIES

A number of authors have suggested that doctoral training should be expanded beyond research training (Chadha, 2013; Lueddeke, 1997; Muzaka, 2009). Harland (2001) for example, argues that PhD training ought to take the form of an apprenticeship underpinned by a qualifications framework which addresses not only research but also teaching and

administration. Such a scheme would not only ameliorate the need for on-the-job training for new lecturers, but also help equip doctoral students with a portfolio of skills to improve their employability. In the remainder of this paper we explore the role that disciplinary associations and learned societies may play in helping to deliver such training.

The main academic associations in the discipline already do much to promote learning and teaching. These bodies include the Political Studies Association (PSA); British International Studies Association (BISA); European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), and; Academic Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES). Most of these organisations benefit from active learning and teaching working groups which run specialised conferences and offer panels to their annual associational events. They also maintain teaching oriented websites and publish, through their sponsored journals, pedagogical research articles (Craig, 2014; Pleschová, 2014).

There are good reasons why it may make sense for PIR associations to expand their remit to provide teacher training for PhD students and early career academics. First, as we suggest above, a number of studies have highlighted the importance of subject specific teacher training. Sadler (2013) is hardly the only author to link confidence to content knowledge or to argue that teacher development programmes need to be sensitive to both. In her survey of social science GTAs and undergraduates, Muzaka found that GTAs lack of a 'sound, overall knowledge of the subject was by far the most oft-repeated problematic aspect for students' (2009: 3). Many students in this study found GTAs knowledge to be fairly limited to their thesis topics, which meant GTAs were unable to draw on the same breadth of content knowledge as academic staff. Similarly, as Pleschová (2014; cf Jenkins 1996) notes most teacher's immediate concerns reflect their particular roles in a specific course and discipline. Arguably for teacher development programmes to have an impact they need to have

significant input from the discipline. Buckler (2001) and Chadha (2013) also argue that a discipline-specific approach can help facilitate the integration of pedagogic knowledge with the learning experience.

The focus on subject level performance is bound to increase in light of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) introduced in the UK[10]. If, as expected, subject level TEFs come into play, the scrutiny of individual units will intensify as metrics are designed to measure both the outcomes of PIR students and departmental level teaching. In our project several respondents referred to the TEF and the raised expectations it brought as one reason for wanting to give greater attention to their teaching profiles. Although sceptical of the attempt to measure teaching quality through metrics and student outcomes, one GTA argued that if teaching was going to become more important and on parity with research, then that needed to be reflected in the training and employment of GTAs.

> [M]y practice [as a GTA] is something that I want to continually develop and it's something that I look forward to in an eventual career in academia. I always thought I'd be research focused and have to do teaching because that came with the role, but I genuinely enjoy teaching and learning from students, sharing insights and approaches to politics with them and I think that it's a fundamental aspect of university that's often overlooked by a lot of the academy with the focus being on REFs, research grants, rankings (GTA 5).

While PIR associations already do much to promote learning and teaching, arguably, much of their work remains focused on research. If learned societies were to consider getting more involved in the delivery of subject specific training, one crucial aspect would be the

[10] The TEF is a UK government scheme which aims to recognise and reward excellence in teaching, learning and outcomes, and to help inform prospective student choice. For more, see: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/

development of a community of practice able to provide support and critique (O'Neill and McNamara, 2015; Sharpe, 2000). In many politics departments, such a community already exists and comes together at teaching away days and similar type events. However even when there is a large and active GTA community, supported by committed academic staff, there can be limited opportunities to intertwine subject specific and generic approaches to academic development. There can also be a limited sense of community unless it is actively promoted. As one GTA in our study put it 'the GTA community has become so dormant in recent years if I compare to the early years when I had just started. And I think this is partly because we have no leadership. I'd like to see GTA meetings where GTAs meet and share ideas' (GTA 16). PIR associations are one avenue through which this could be encouraged as they help build sense of community and along with it perform 'identity work' so that early career teacher-scholars may (Winstone and Moore, 2016). Many organisations already have active postgraduate networks which host teaching blogs and prizes. The members of these groups could be a base for more formalised training opportunities. Here, the notion of 'community' need not be limited to geographical location (Wisker et al, 2007). An online community of GTAs could dialogue to share experiences and problems from their different sites. This could provide a way of bolstering the peer support that GTAs provide each other and even facilitate a virtual GTA peer mentor system with more experienced GTAs or early career academics linked to newer teachers (Buehler and Marcum, 2007).

A further reason that learned societies may be vehicles for teacher training concerns the limits of what is feasible in university departments. To be sure, universities must place a central role in preparing their teaching staff for the classroom. Yet providing for training and career development requires the time and energy of academic and administrative staff. While the project recommended that academic units should have a robust GTA Coordinator with

appropriate work load model support, there is a limit to what such persons can accomplish. To cite one example from our project, it is well known that in the UK one way to boost the credentials and strengthen the confidence and identity of GTAs as teachers is through Higher Education Academy recognition (Hibbert and Semler, 2016). However, a significant obstacle in achieving HEA status is that at many institutions, including Newcastle, priority is given to those on full time contracts. This means that the waiting list for GTAs to get onto the necessary modules is, at the time of writing, over one year. We argue that it is worth exploring if PIR associations could help ease this backlog by working with the HEA to establish accredited ways, via experiential routes, for GTAs to obtain Fellowship status.

Our argument extends a familiar critique. It is not a new idea that teacher development ought to be more devolved to faculties or departments. While in many ways this is what we've done at Newcastle, our suggestion here is that teacher training would also benefit from widening out to disciplinary based organisations. Certainly there are a number of obstacles to overcome for this to happen. Foremost would be the need for university buy-in to help support the costs of providing training. This issue alone could kill off any progress on the idea no matter its merits. It would help, perhaps if the associations could join ranks and pool resources, as they have done in the past on several issues[11]. There are also significant issues around who, within the associations, would provide training and how it would sit alongside programmes and modules currently offered within universities and the wider sector. Yet over the past two decades there has been a recognition that much more can be done to aid the discipline beyond

[11] For example, PSA, BISA and UACES formed a working group to respond to the TEF consultation. In addition, all three bodies contribute to an annual learning and teaching conference.

supporting and disseminating research. Learned societies have begun to play a greater role in pedagogical innovation, in responding to wider trends in the higher education sector and in promoting professional and career development (Harris, 2015). Perhaps it is now time to begin a discussion about expanding the circle to include teacher training.

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